A common theme in dystopic literature often involves a situation that gets out of control. Whether it is population, scientific experiments, or government control, it all involves a situation that went too far. Zamyatin’s We presents a story about government control, however this control is about something much bigger. The citizens never actually speak in a negative light about the One State until the MEPHI present themselves. Instead, it is up to the reader to decide if they feel the One State is an evil state. The character of D-503 represents the internal struggle of joining freedom and control.

The One State is introduced to the reader through a newspaper article. This article tells them of the glory of The One State, and the glory of its Benefactor. In fact, the people of The One State even believe its existence is logical and that it has “mathematically infallible happiness” (Zamyatin, p. 3). The way the reader is shown The One State immediately gives the idea of totalitarianism, a state with one single person controlling everything without opposition. The One State even asserts that should the unknown creatures on alien planets not understand this happiness, “it will be our duty to force them to be happy” (Zamyatin, p. 3). The implied audience is supposed to feel that this The One State is a perfect utopia, but the reader is immediately guided, almost forced, to understand that the One State is not a utopia. They are instead convinced it is a state of totalitarianism, a state with one single person controlling everything without opposition.

The reader quickly assumes that if The One State represents totalitarianism over a group of people, then the MEPHI represents freedom. The issue with this assessment, is the reader only truly feels this way because they are “implicated in making a satiric judgement on folly without that judgment ever being made manifest in the text” (Csicsery-Ronay, p. 241). The reader uses their judgement and own experiences to fill in the areas that are left out. Csicsery-Ronay goes on to explain that “The reader is the seduced into co-operating with the story, just as D-503 is seduced into co-operating with the MEPHI” (Csicsery-Ronay, p. 241).The narrator, D-503, however, is unreliable. He is constantly unsure of what to think, and switches his thoughts constantly. He immediately casts doubt when he refuses to go to the Bureau of Guardians to report I-330. Someone who has complete faith in The One State should have easily accomplished this action. Although the only point of view provided is that of D-503, the One State functions efficiently and there are no signs of unhappiness until the day of the vote. Even then, whether the MEPHI are freedom fighters or terrorists is highly subjective. It is up to the reader to insert their views of government control versus freedom to decide whether the One-State is good or evil.

In The One State, each individual believes that he or she is contributing to the greater good of the State. Each person has a role, be those ciphers, teachers, or guardians. The people do not believe in the term “I” or “You”, but instead use “We”, and even consider the term to be offensive. When addressed as “you”, D-503 has this feeling: “She used an ancient, long-forgotten pronunciation of “You,” the “You” of the owner to the slave, and it entered my sharply, slowly” (Zamyatin, p. 64). D-503 believes that by being a We, he is cooperating, however, he is merely being obedient. This mistake is often made; from childhood, children are taught to be obedient, to follow instructions and believe lies, and not to question it. The issue with this, according to Claude Steiner is “after many years of obedience training, we become adults and we’re expected to suddenly think for ourselves…Unfortunately, for many of us, that is very difficult, given our childhood training” (Steiner, p. 51). He goes on to say that while we are told as adults to not believe deception, and refuse to be told how to think, we are also told to believe people of authority, such as scientists, politicians, and police.

~~The existence of The One State is justified to the reader simply because it exists. D-503 uses the analogy of man once having a tail. “But can you imagine yourself now with a tail…I cannot picture a city without the dressing of the Green Wall, I cannot picture a life not expressed in the numerical overlay of the Table”( (Zamyatin, p. 12). D-503 presents the idea of a perfect life with an illogical explanation. Based on his reasoning, if The One State were to fail, and the walls were to come down, he would initially mourn the passing of The One State, much like man mourned the losing of his tail. However, he would come to appreciate whatever new life lay ahead of him. In the end, he would look back and consider it absurd to live under the rule of The One State.~~

As the story progresses, D-503 becomes more distant from the One State and I-330 turns him from someone who thinks happiness is control, to someone willing to steal the Intrepid for the rebel cause. If the reader were supposed to view the Benefactor and the One State as control, then the MEPHI would represent the desire for freedom. The issue in this is the MEPHI and I-330 treat D-503 in the same way as the One State. With the way D-503 reacts to the idea of I-330 leaving him, the reader knows that he is enamored with her. When she tests him and says she will leave forever, he responds, “I can’t go on without you, I can’t. I must not be without you” to which she simply responds, “Yes, I know” (Zamyatin, pp. 162-163). The reader never knows how I-330 feels about D-503. While the reader should embrace the rebellion of the MEPHI, both The One State and the MEPHI are formally equal. “The immediate success of the MEPHI rebellion depends on the success I-330 has in dominating D-503; and the suppression of the rebelling appears to depend on the Benefactor’s ability to do the same thing” (Csicsery-Ronay, p. 242). Much as I-330 never lets D-503 get too far, the Benefactor never subjects D-503 to the machine, as they both depend on him.

This behavior shows the irony of the title of the novel. Even as D-503 attempts to work with the MEPHI, he is does not possess his own thoughts, “for D-503 can never be an ‘I’. His identity is a function either of the State, or of I-330. He is always ‘We’” (Csicsery-Ronay, p. 242). The One State and the MEPHI treat D-503 equally. The MEPHI, or I-330, give D-503 the opportunity to leave, knowing that they had control over him and that he would not. The Benefactor also lets D-503 live instead of viewing him as an offending cog in the machine and killing him. D-503 was not forced down either path, but instead had a choice in whom to help.

The choice presented to D-503 is very black and white. He can either choose freedom, the MEPHI, the overly apparent good in the novel, or he can choose structure and control, The One State, the clear evil. D-503’s understanding of freedom is of an “unorganized, savage state” (Zamyatin, p. 13). This is written in the books, and taught from birth. The alternative is The One State, all powerful, working in perfect unison to achieve a common goal. When presented with these choices, freedom can sounrgoud dangerous, and not worth it. In the end, D-503 chooses control and security, at the expense of the potential to live a life in the way he wants.

There is no doubt behind the idea that The One State is a symbol of the Panopticon; a prison in which all cells are visible at any time. With The One States translucent walls, schedule of events to always be at, and the reading of mail, it is obvious that The One State is a state of almost constant surveillance. Only occasionally and through cleverly devised secret passageways are the MEPHI and D-503 temporarily able to avoid detection. Punishment in The One State works much like that of the Jeremy Bentham’s idea of punishment. “Bentham’s main concern here is in achieving the greatest apparent suffering with the least real suffering, that is, achieving the greatest effect of the punishment on others with the least inflicted pain” (Bozovic, p. 5). The Benefactor employs this same method of discipline. When The One State has problems with its people, which rarely happens, “they are easily repaired, without having to stop the perpetual great progress of the whole machine. And to expel the offending cog, we have the skillful, severe hand of the Benefactor” (Zamyatin, p. 14). The suffering of the One is used to inflict the fear in others to do the right thing.

The Panopticon, however, does not have to be a physical place. The main aspect of the Panopticon is control, and so it does not have to be simply for prisoners. In Jeremy Bentham’s letters, he describes the many uses for the Panopticon through letters 18 to 21. These uses include manufactories, mad-houses, hospitals, and schools. According to Foucault, all that is needed to do is place a supervisor in the central tower and shut in each person, be them a madman, patient, or schoolboy (Foucault, p. 200). This then leads to the effect of the Panopticon; “to induce the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, p. 201). In Bentham’s design, the supervisor could never be seen, and as such, the observee would not know if he was being watched. In fact, no supervisor could be placed in the central tower, and the same effect would still happen. This shows that the Panopticon does not have to be a physical place, but instead a frame of mind. If one believes they are potentially being watched, while it might not completely dissuade people from committing crimes, passing diseases, or cheating, it will certainly cause people to have caution. In a way, the Panopticon is a conscience.

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